BOOK REVIEW

John Pateman worked in public libraries for 44 years and was a Chief Librarian in four library systems in the UK and Canada. He founded the Cuban Libraries Solidarity Group to counter US attacks on the Cuban library system. He received the Cuban Culture Award in 2003.


Reviewed by John Pateman

This book lives up to its title and provides a comprehensive account of Cuba’s most well-known Librarian. I met Marta at a number of events including the 1994 International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) conference in Havana. Marta was at the forefront of library development in Cuba and held senior positions in several of its key library institutions. She was also a cultural ambassador who showcased to the world library community the achievements of the Cuban library system, which was one of the fruits of the 1959 Cuban Revolution.

Alkalimat and Williams ground their study of Marta’s library work in her family history and the wider context of Cuban society. Her roots can be traced to the enslaved African and colonial Spanish legacies that are essential components of the Cuban people. As a Black woman, Marta suffered from racism and misogyny, which was mitigated but not entirely eliminated by the triumph of the Revolution. She was one of a whole generation of Black female Cubans who benefited from the new social relations that were established by the Cuban Communist Party.

Part 1 of this study focuses on Marta the Afro-Cuban Woman and gives much useful background information about her nationality, family, and education. She enthusiastically embraced the Revolution as she saw it as an opportunity to advance her race and gender. Part 2 is about Marta the Librarian and provides an overview of libraries and information technology in the Cuban context.
In doing so the authors use a Marxist analysis: “The world’s first libraries were for the elites, because literacy was for the few and powerful”.

Information is power and libraries have always served the interests of the ruling class; they continue to do so today in capitalist societies. It is only in socialist societies that they can meet the needs of the proletariat. Libraries were not a high priority in colonies for anyone except the settler elite and this is still the case in countries such as Canada, where Indigenous Peoples are excluded from the public library.

Marta’s first revolutionary position was in 1961 when she became the Librarian of the critically important Central Board for Planning and Economic Development (JUCEPLAN), which was responsible for planning the Cuban economy. In 1967 Marta became the Librarian at another vital institution, the Casa de las Americas, which was founded by Haydee Santamaria in 1959 to embrace the cultural workers and artists of Latin America and support them as they created art that challenged oppressive regimes.

In 1987, the Minister of Culture Armando Hart appointed Marta as the Director of the Jose Marti National Library. Under her leadership, it took on the role of coordinating regional provincial libraries, municipal libraries, and all public libraries.

Marta also taught Library and Information Science (LIS) at the University of Havana and was very active in IFLA, where she led the campaign to counter attempts by the USA to use so-called “independent” libraries to undermine the Cuban regime.

This book is illustrated with photos that cover all the periods of Marta’s life, and it is supplemented with appendixes that include a family tree, Marta’s plan for the library at JUCEPLAN, and an overview of her time at the Casa de las Americas. There are also her remarks at the opening session of the 1994 IFLA conference in Havana, and at the 2001 American Library Association conference when she detailed the impact that the US blockade had on Cuban libraries and defended them against US attacks.

Marta is generous toward her comrades, including a heartwarming tribute to Olinta Ariosa Morales, who was Head of the Library Division at the Ministry of Culture and Director of the National Library. Olinta introduced the concept of establishing ten cultural institutions in every town, among which the library was viewed as the most important.

This book is a fitting tribute to Marta Terry, one of the less well-acknowledged leaders of the Cuban Revolution. Librarians are often considered as a secondary profession to the more prestigious occupations such as Doctors and Teachers. However, without Librarians and libraries none of these professionals would be able to qualify and operate.
The authors also recognize the contribution that Librarians and libraries made to the transformation of Cuban society. The 1961 Mass Literacy Campaign created an appetite for reading that only the public library system could meet by providing books free at the point of need.

This study would be of interest to LIS students but also to general readers and to those who want to deepen their understanding of the Cuban revolutionary process. It should be read in particular by library practitioners in capitalist countries, as it will help them to understand how they can develop community-led and needs-based library services.